

2005 State of the County Address



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Chairman, Roanoke County Board of Supervisors
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“Growth Through Vision”

Welcome & Introduction

Good morning. It is encouraging to see so many familiar faces from the business, government and education community gathered to reflect on the past year and embrace the future. As you know, Roanoke County has had a rewarding year and by continuing to work together with the business, government and education sector I envision an even brighter tomorrow filled with much growth and opportunity. The State of Roanoke County is something all of us in this room can and should be proud of.

I would like to acknowledge and thank my fellow Board members and the County Administrator for their support and work over the past year. It has certainly been a busy year for Roanoke County and together we have accomplished a lot.

I would also like to recognize and thank our state legislators, constitutional officers and school board members for their continued support.

Thank you also to the outstanding staff of Roanoke County, many of whom I see seated in the audience. Too often you are unfairly criticized. I want you to know that I have the utmost respect for your ethics, fairness and professionalism in the way you carry out your work and treat our citizens. Your jobs certainly are not easy, but they are essential and I stand here today in support of each and every one of you.

I would also like to extend a well deserved thank you to the Roanoke Regional Chamber of Commerce for providing this opportunity to speak to you today. As I said, it has been a phenomenal year for Roanoke County. This morning, I would like to summarize some of our bigger accomplishments. I would also like to share my vision for the future. As a native of Roanoke County who chose to live, work and raise a family here, I have a stake in this community. And just like many of you in this room, I want this area to thrive so that future generations, including my own children and grandchildren, have a place they, too, can work and raise a family.

Schools

The hallmark of a great community is its schools and Roanoke County's schools are growing and stronger than ever. Each year, Roanoke County's 10 middle and high schools, and 17 elementary schools are ranked among the top in the state and nation. For the fourth consecutive year, county schools have been named a gold medal school district by Expansion Management Magazine. To qualify for this distinguished recognition, schools are evaluated in three areas which assess test scores and graduation rates, the community's financial commitment to education, and the level of adult education and income levels. This designation is a significant achievement for our schools which rank in the top 16% of all districts evaluated. Not only did county schools achieve the gold medal designation, they also received the fourth highest overall ranking in the State of Virginia. What an accomplishment. At this time, I would like to extend a big thank you to our teachers and staff for their commitment to educating the

youth in Roanoke County and for all that they do to make our schools award winning.

Developing an outstanding school system that attracts both residents and businesses alike requires collaborative efforts. The cooperative relationship that exists between the School Board and Board of Supervisors allows us to expand our opportunities in new, innovative directions. One such example is Roanoke County's recent commitment to set aside funding to assist the Art Museum of Western Virginia in establishing a regional education program for school children. This partnership, which also includes Virginia Tech, recognizes the importance of the arts to the community and its contribution to the overall quality of life in our valley.

Another noteworthy achievement in 2005 is the adoption of a joint funding method for the county and schools capital improvement programs. As part of this process, the county and schools each contribute a set amount of money every year which is then used to fund the projects prioritized in their respective CIPs. This guided approach ensures that an ongoing stream of funding will be available to meet the future needs of both the county and schools, and will allow us to be proactive and better positioned for the future. These joint efforts would not be possible without the cooperative relationship enjoyed with our School Board.

Libraries

Roanoke County's six libraries are a valuable resource for our students, and the community as a whole. In fact, our library system continues to be the busiest system in southwest Virginia with more than one million items checked out each year! And I anticipate those numbers will only continue to rise in the future. This year, the board committed to build a new library branch in Southwest Roanoke County for folks of all ages in Roanoke County and surrounding jurisdictions to enjoy.

Information Technology

Providing state-of-the-art technology for our libraries and school system would not be possible without the efforts of our Information Technology Department. And Roanoke County's IT staff is clearly among the best. For the second year in a row, the department was selected one of the nation's top ten Digital Counties in their population category. I could not be more proud of the talented men and women in this department. Thank you for your hard work and dedication.

Public Safety

Our public safety agencies are also tops in their field for their commitment to the community. This year, our Police and Fire Departments each took home awards. Fire and Rescue Chief Rick Burch received a Governor's Award for his outstanding management and leadership skills. Our Police Department also received not one but three state and national awards for traffic safety initiatives.

Another initiative we are equally proud of involves regional cooperation. Earlier this year, Roanoke County's Fire and Rescue Department along with the City of Roanoke Fire-EMS signed an automatic aid agreement to improve service to citizens in both jurisdictions. Automatic aid sends the closest component of firefighting or medical rescue equipment to the 9-1-1 caller regardless of the location.

Over the past year, Roanoke County has also made enormous strides in terms of public safety projects. Earlier this year, we broke ground on the much anticipated Public Safety Center, off Cove Road. Construction is on schedule and within budget for the facility, which is scheduled for completion in the spring of 2007, and will house not only our Police and Fire Departments, but 911 Dispatch Center, Emergency Operations Center and Information Technology Department.

Much progress has also been made with respect to the new Western Virginia Regional Jail, which is scheduled to be completed in September 2008. It goes without saying that getting to this point has not been easy, but no one can argue against the need for this facility. This project is moving ahead and is a shining example of regional cooperation involving our neighboring jurisdictions. This facility will not only serve our needs, but also those of Salem, Franklin and Montgomery Counties. For some time now, the Roanoke Valley has been looking for ways to partner with localities in the New River Valley. This project is an excellent example of what can be accomplished when neighbors work together.

Economic Development

Job creation and retention is of tremendous importance to Roanoke County. As I have said before, Roanoke County is open for the “right-kind” of business. And the past year was met with good news. Just a few weeks ago, ITT Night Vision announced the creation of 250 new jobs as part of a \$50 million investment in its Roanoke County facility. We are proud that after 40 years this company continues to make its home in Roanoke County. Congratulations to ITT—a clear leader in their field for providing much needed high paying jobs to keep our young people living and working here in the Valley.

We are equally proud of another great company that has made its home in Roanoke County. Just two days after the ITT announcement, ground was broken for Tecton Products. Tecton is the second high-tech company to locate in the County’s Center for Research and Technology. This \$6.5 million initial investment will create nearly 60 more high paying jobs for our citizens. Thank you Tecton for investing in Roanoke County!

Vision

I would like to expand on this wonderful news for just a moment. The Center for Research and Technology near Dixie Caverns is an example of planning for future growth. About seven years ago, our board had a vision for Roanoke County that would utilize our available land, capable workforce and close proximity to Virginia Tech. Today, that dream or vision is this great research park, which has secured two wonderful tenants in Tecton and Novozymes Biologicals. Today I would like to talk about my vision for Roanoke County; one I hope will also become a reality in the coming years not just for Roanoke County but the entire Roanoke Valley.

Plan

Ladies and gentleman, we have done a great job attracting companies to our region, but we can and need to do even more for our citizens and existing businesses. We need to think outside jurisdictional lines. We need to capitalize on our region's scenic beauty, cultural amenities, and relaxing atmosphere. I want Roanoke County and the Roanoke Valley to become a **destination**— a place where people can experience a weekend getaway, sporting events or a full-fledged vacation. Our region already offers so much, including venues for sporting events. But we can do much more. Imagine what it would be like to have our own water park, theme park, large-scale aquatic center, or another major sports complex in our area. This would provide our citizens with fun ways to spend their time without traveling outside of the Valley. With respect to the business community, it is incumbent upon us as leaders to create an environment that allows our existing businesses to become stronger and provide them with greater opportunities for expansion.

As an aside, consider this. For years we have tried negotiating, writing letters and other initiatives to bring a low-cost air carrier to the Roanoke Valley – all without success. By becoming a vibrant, major destination, it is my sincere belief that the air carriers will want to come to us.

It is time to quiet our critics. The vision I am sharing with you today can be accomplished and we need to act now. We have a window of opportunity that we should take advantage of before it closes. We are experiencing regional cooperation like never before. Our elected leaders are willing to sit down, talk and act. What I am referring to is cooperation; not consolidation. Our elected leaders want to do what is in the best interest of the region as a whole.

We also need to act now because land is becoming increasingly scarce in Roanoke County and Vinton, as well as in the cities of Salem and Roanoke. It is my belief that the Roanoke Valley can no longer exist on revenues derived primarily from real estate taxes. To do so, we would become stagnant as our valuable land disappears. But with a common theme for future growth in the Roanoke Valley, we can not only survive but thrive as a destination point.

We need to act now for yet another reason. As many of you know, the Roanoke Valley has made a name for itself as a place to host sporting tournaments. These events add to the economic well being of the Valley by pumping millions of dollars into the local economy. Just this summer, the Roanoke Valley hosted several new events; National AAU Championships in baseball and basketball and the Class D ASA Men's Slow Pitch World Series. These events do not happen by accident. They are the result of cooperative regional efforts spearheaded by the Sports Marketing Committee of the Roanoke Valley Convention and Visitors Bureau. The Sports Marketing Committee is made up of government representatives and businesses from the entire region and is a shining example of what can be accomplished by working together. To that end it is my honor to announce their most recent accomplishment. The N.S.A. Girl's

Softball Class B World Series will be coming back to Roanoke next summer. This event, first held in 2002, is expected to contribute in excess of \$4 million to the local economy. We clearly have a base to build upon thanks to the efforts of this committee.

However, there is no guarantee of future success. We know right now that many communities are after the sports marketing dollar and are building state-of-the-art facilities to host them. Roanoke County recognizes the importance of sports events and the need to modernize and expand our facilities to attract them. Right now, we are involved in a comprehensive study of our parks and recreation programs and facilities. As part of this master planning process, we are looking at what our citizens' want and need over the next 10-15 years. We are examining the types of facilities that would not only benefit the youth athletic community but could help support the Valley's sports marketing efforts. We just wrapped up a series of community meetings and are taking stock of the feedback we have received regarding everything from recreational opportunities to sports marketing ventures. Folks, we need to put that knowledge and information to work for our region as a whole.

There is yet another reason we do not need to sit on the sidelines. As you are well aware, work is proceeding with Explore Park. While it is still in the early stages, I have great hopes for this project. This is a fantastic facility that is quite frankly on the verge of closing for good. With Larry Vander Maten, we have the makings of something great. Explore Park, with more than one thousand acres of land, now offers one of our biggest hopes to becoming the great destination I envision. What we have here is a potential anchor for the Roanoke Valley.

I would be remiss in not mentioning another great attraction, located in a place very close to my heart. I am talking about the planned golf course for Mt. Pleasant. This is not just any golf course. This is a place that has the ability to put the Roanoke Valley on the map. This upscale golf course will be the only one of its kind east of the Mississippi and will bring people into the Valley from around the country. I could not be more proud of the Board's decision to approve this project and the community's willingness to embrace it.

I am proud to say there are other leaders who join me in my vision for the Roanoke Valley. As I have said before, the time to act is now. We currently have a group of leaders who are willing to approach projects from a regional perspective in order to maximize future tourism and sports marketing opportunities. Roanoke Mayor Nelson Harris, Salem Mayor Sonny Tarpley, and Vinton Mayor Brad Grose share my commitment to making the Roanoke Valley a tourist destination. As leaders of this Valley, we want to move this area forward and have committed to working together to make this vision a reality. As I said before, I am not talking about consolidation; but rather, cooperation. We will retain our independence, our history, our heritage, but we recognize that we have to act as a team for the collective good of the Valley.

I have already met with each of the mayors standing here with me today, and we have also come together as a group. We will be meeting again in December to begin laying out our plans and will regularly update our respective boards and councils, knowing that as four jurisdictions we can accomplish far more than we can alone. This is a commitment that we have made to ourselves and this Valley. Gentlemen, let me thank you for partnering with me in this vision.

In conclusion, I would like to say that as a native of Roanoke County, I am a stakeholder in this process and vision. Just last week I began a new chapter in my own life. After 25 years in the retail industry, I retired and will be devoting even more time to my civic responsibilities. As citizens and members of the business, government and education sector, all of you in this room are also stakeholders. We, as a community, must embrace the future and not be afraid of what it holds. To be participants in the future, we must be proactive and not reactionary. I challenge you to also embrace “our” vision and to help it become a reality.